

Early in the fourteenth century, a very important competition took place at Florence, between Brunelleschi, Donatello, Ghiberti, and four other eminent sculptors; for under good and honourable regulations, the greatest were not loath to compete. Subjects, to be executed in bronze, for the ornament of the gates of the Baptistery of St. John, were confided to their emulation, each being provided, at the public expense, with every convenience of studio, furnace, and other accommodation, that could ensure success, and a sum for personal expenses. Having done so much for the comfort of the artists during the period of their exertions, a competent tribunal next received the consideration of the Florentines; thirty-four men of taste and talent, some artists, and some amateurs, were appointed judges to determine which was entitled to especial admiration, and public employment. Their votes were divided, and no decision obtained from them; but the magnanimous candour of Brunelleschi and Donatello, who had each the same number of votes as Ghiberti, at once settled it in his favour, and proved the tribunal incompetent: those generous rivals saw no room to doubt his superiority in that contest; and posterity has sanctioned their opinion. The incompetency of this tribunal was, however, but negatively bad; it allowed the scales of justice to remain in doubtful suspension, but it did not actually reverse its tendency, and cloud the prospects and fame of a deserving candidate. A similar diffidence, or modest ignorance, was remarkable when Leonardo da Vinci, and Michael Angelo Buonarroti, made their great trial of skill at the Council Chamber; the splendour of the one did not eclipse the majesty of the other, as the success of one man's talent invariably smothered the fame of every other in our modern competitions.

In France, during the period of religious animosity, from the reign of Francis the First to that of Louis the Fourteenth, public competitions were often productive of fine works, as the best portions of the palace of Fontainebleau, and the beautiful square of the Louvre attest. In those instances, native talent, both Catholic and Protestant, in worthy emulation, stands triumphant amidst the performances of foreign rivalry. The same system was resorted to for the east-front of the Louvre, and the award of superior merit was in favour of Claude Perrault, the physician and mathematician; but a corrupt court, where the spirit of intellectual freedom had not survived that of anarchy and rebellion, could not rest satisfied with the result of competition and public opinion. Louis the Fourteenth endeavoured to set aside the design of Perrault, and invited Bernini, the fashionable Italian architect and sculptor of the day, to visit his court and design something worthy the magnificence and splendour of that pompous monarch. Princely honours attended on the foreign artist in his progress to the French capital, but Colbert found it advisable to lean towards the popular opinion: the king relented, Bernini retired with the same affected magnificence that accompanied his arrival, and the design of Perrault, the masterpiece of that era, before which even Whitehall sinks in comparison,

was completed, at once a monument to French taste and a trophy to public opinion.

Under Napoleon, competition was far from pure. The jury of artists for the Decennial prizes adjudged the great prize for a subject of ancient history to Girodet, for a scene of the Deluge. The emperor was disappointed: he had expected that prize to be given to his first painter, David, for the intercession of the Sabine women between their enraged relatives and their Roman husbands. The judges could not indeed be induced to convict themselves of incompetency in that decision; but, to conciliate the sovereign, in the next trial, they conferred the prize for a modern subject on David's coronation, and not on the plague of Jaffa, by Gros, which they individually preferred. A sample of artists, eminent for talent and character, rendered dishonest by the interference of a potentate.

At the present time in France, where artists constitute an influential portion of the intellectual aristocracy (the aristocracy of talent and professions); where authority and intrigue are variously apportioned, no one competition is of much importance, for the effect of a partial decision by the court party, is frequently neutralised by an equally unsound award in favour of the injured artist, by some municipality of opposition politics, to whose prejudices an appeal is made, and who have in their gift a provincial commission.

In our own country, competitions are very unsatisfactory, and frequently alike absurd and unjust: is that for the Nelson memorial, the vacillation of the committee in setting aside their first hasty award, and advertising a new contest and exhibition, with their final confirmation of that first very doubtful judgment, compromised the dignity of the committee as much as its taste, and unnecessarily increased by many thousands of pounds the expense (besides trouble) of the artists. That competition was fatal to the confidence of artists in a tribunal of amateurs of rank and fortune, but that of the Royal Exchange with a tribunal of artists was still worse: the jury of three eminent architects, refused any premium to the design which they acknowledged to be the best, under the plea that it could not be built for the sum stipulated; nor was that degree reversed when contractors of reputation offered to undertake it under securities; but they gave the premiums to other candidates, whose designs they declared to be quite impracticable. They were next requested to prepare a design themselves. It is understood, that two of those three judges, after examining and condemning all the designs, actually consented to do so, but the uneasily proceeding was checked by public opinion. The ultimate competition was between two architects of considerable and nearly equal influence among the civic authorities.

The recent competition exhibitions at Westminster Hall, for the decoration of the Parliament Houses, were at first hailed as the beginning of a better system, more intellectual and pure; but up to the present time, the results have led only to disappointment among the great body of the candidates, and growing indifference in the public. Some artists, after being rewarded the first year, had their works treated as unworthy even to be publicly exhibited at the second, whilst others have been appointed for actual employment on one trial, or even without passing through the prescribed ordeal at all. Several who have appeared honourably and with general approbation at all the exhibitions, have been utterly neglected or discarded by the royal commission, although the leading object of its appointment was the encouragement of native talent in the higher walks of art, and the commissioners had pronounced the works of many of those artists "highly creditable to the country."

The whole of the evidence on competition, tends to prove that in respect of matters of art, a competent tribunal and equal justice have scarcely ever been obtained. In questions of taste, there is indeed so much room for doubt, that prevarication and partiality are, less obvious and disgraceful than in simple questions of property, and yet the injury done to the sufferers is far greater where professional reputation as well as fortune is involved. Why should not artists, whose fame and means of existence are at stake, have as good protection from a committee of taste, as per-

sons in trade are sure to find in a court of justice? Why are not committees, like judges and juries, responsible for their proceedings, either to a higher tribunal or to public opinion? Why are they not, in like manner, obliged to examine and consider both sides of the question? Our juries are selected for their impartiality, and every accident in that respect is rectified, by allowing each contending party to challenge the jurors: no false delicacy towards jurymen is allowed to weigh against the welfare of the parties before the Court and the strict rules of justice. To see that they attend to their prescribed duties, and that the evidence is fairly placed before them, and not to interfere with the verdict, a judge provides who, after a long career of study and experience, is placed above ordinary rivalry and contention, in circumstances that render character, especially for impartiality and judgment, to him, all-important. Should he, forgetful of his high responsibility, lean unduly to one side and misdirect the jury, an appeal lies to a higher Court, where his error or misinterpretation is sure to be severely discussed, and, if a case is made out, the trial is set aside or the verdict is reversed, without the least complacency for his authority and feelings. Thus is the property of the humblest trader protected; thus the life or liberty of the poorest wretch accused of crime, is held paramount to all considerations of rank and station. In questions of property, every possible discussion has long been afforded; witnesses are examined, cross-examined; and re-examined, by contending advocates. The same protection has of late years been granted to persons criminally indicted.—And why should this wholesome respect for mutual rights, be denied to men of intellectual pursuits—authors or artists, who embark fame and fortune on the tide of public competition? Why should those to whom they entrust all that is precious in their estimation, think lightly of their responsibility. Something like the system of judge and jury, or an assimilation to the best of our prerogative Courts can alone render competitions among artists fair, honourable, and efficient, and give to the emanations of genius their proper value among us.

In the case immediately before us, It is proposed that a prize of 1,000*l.* be given to the artist who, in a general competition, shall produce the best painting twelve or fifteen feet one way, and ten or twelve the other; the subject is defined, and in several points, the precise mode of treating it. With ~~no~~ great temptation, it is reasonable to suppose ~~that~~ many will overlook the expense, trouble, disappointment, and serious inconveniences that await all but the one fortunate candidate; it is reasonable to suppose that fifty artists may risk comfort and reputation in the attempt. We feel assured that the gentlemen who propose this competition, besides the desire to obtain as fine a picture as possible, are anxious to make it worth while to men of talent and character, to vie with each other in honourable emulation. They would evince generous delicacy towards the less successful artists who gave proof of high talent in the contest; for their object is not to encourage speculators to make a heedless dash at the 1,000*l.*, nor can they wish for a gaudy, meretricious picture, but one wherein the subject is fully considered; the character of each figure is faithfully studied and pathetically delineated;—where the action of all is in due relation one with the other, and the whole is combined into a rational and picturesque composition. Such are the essentials of high art; they are best attended to in the simplest and least expensive materials, such as involve a larger outlay of mind in proportion to that of money. Thus ~~may~~ the best results be obtained with ~~as~~ little injury as possible to the candidates, as all virtuous and religious men must wish to do.

We now proceed to state the artist's case in two ways:—first, as it will stand if the advertised regulations are carried out; and next, as it would be, if our suggestions were adopted, supposing in either case the number of candidates to be fifty.

Fifty finished paintings, varying from twelve feet by ten to fifteen feet by twelve, would involve the artists in expenses (actual outlay) from 30% to 40% each; average, 36%; total in money, 1,800%.

In time expended, average seven months: